

Yin and Yang

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It's been eighteen years since the destruction of the life fibers, and Mako and Ryuko are happily married with two kids; the twins Azami and Yuu. Azami isn't very happy herself, however; she's struggling in school, constantly fights with her brother, and she has no friends. When a new VR MMO offers her a chance of escape, Azami takes it, but all is not how it first appears.

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First Day at a New School

Chapter 1: First Day at a New School

Darkness.

All she could see was an inky blackness, a void that seemed to stretch into eternity. There was no light, no sound, no anything. Then, a drop of warm, crimson fluid fell onto her eye.

Blood.

What started as a slow trickle gave way to a shower, to a stream, to a flood. A torrent of blood washed over the girl, smothering her in it, and yet she did not gag or drown.

"Where is all this coming from?" she thought as she floated through the ocean of gore. "And why does it taste so good?"

The girl suddenly felt rush of cool liquid across her face, causing her to sit straight up in surprise and begin coughing rapidly.

"You slept in again, Azami" said her older brother, Yuu, who was standing over her with an empty bucket in his hands.

"Ah, fuck, why did you do that? Do you want me to deck you again or something?" she asked, glaring at him with her dark brown eyes. Her short black hair was now a complete mess, and her orange pajamas with adorable white bunny faces printed all over them.

Yuu, on the other hand, was already fully dressed and prepared for the day. His hair was exactly like Azami's, but was confined to an ordered ponytail instead of being allowed to fly around wildly like his sisters. His bluish-grey school uniform was cleanly pressed, and without any wrinkles. It was hard to tell if Yuu's blue eyes were looking at his sister with pity or contempt.

"Even someone with a brain as small as yours can't have forgotten what day it is" he said with much more scorn in his voice than a twelve-year-old should have. Azami sat in her bed with a confused look on her face for a few moments before the metaphorical light bulb finally lit up.

"It's the first day of school today!" she practically screamed.

Before Yuu could even gloat some more, Azami was already out of her bed and rushing to put on her uniform. Once she had her blue skirt, white shirt, and blue scarf on, she dashed to the bathroom. Azami poured shampoo onto her toothbrush with her left hand and grabbed her hair brush with her right. She started bushing her hair and her teeth at the same time as she ran back towards her room to get her backpack.

Once her pack was on her shoulders, Azami was running towards her front door so fast she seemed like she was planning on ramming it down. The only thing that stopped Azami from following through on her crazed plan was the hand of her mom grabbing the back of the neck of shirt and nearly choking the poor girl to death.

"And just where do you think you're going?" asked Mako Matoi, a stern look on her face. Her long brown hair and white apron were both recently stained with yellow grease, but her green t-shirt and pink skirt were both untouched.

"To school?" Azami coughed out, struggling in vain against her mom's iron grip.

"Not without a good breakfast you're not!" she yelled, throwing her daughter down towards their dining table. Even though Mako was no longer the slum girl she used to be, and could afford all the furniture she wanted, she still chose to use the tiny wooden table from her childhood to eat; she felt it kept the family closer together.

"Now how are you supposed to get anything done on an empty stomach? Let alone learn!" Mako said as she stuffed her daughter's

face full of croquettes. "You are not going anywhere until you've properly eaten".

"You better listen to her dear" said Ryuko Matoi, Azami's other mother, across the table in her red business suit that matched the red highlights in her short black hair. "You know that she's not going to let you go you've gained at least two kilos".

Yuu was also already sitting at the table, but was too busy efficiently eating his meal to say anything.

Eventually Azami's cheeks were full to bursting, but instead swallowing any of it, she spat it all out at once like some kind of ground meat sprinkler.

"Gross! Your cooking tastes like shit mom" she said, wiping her mouth on her arm.

"Oh, did that get mixed in again?" asked Mako. "I'm sorry, but you never know what you'll get with my famous mystery croquettes".

"That's not what I meant; all your cooking fucking sucks mom" said Azami. "Can't you just hire a cook, or eat out?"

"No, because they don't have my special ingredient; love" Mako said, poking her twelve-year-old daughter on the nose like she was four.

"Just look at Ryuko here" Mako said before walking over behind her wife and grasping Ryuko's breasts firmly in her hands. "Your mama's boobs wouldn't be nearly as big if she didn't eat my mom's love infused croquettes. Is that what you want? To remain flat chested all your life?"

Azami and Ryuko both blushed as red as beats, and even Yuu nearly gagged to death on a croquette in embarrassment.

"Mako, knock it off" Ryuko said, pushing Mako away. "Not in front of the kids".

"Yeah... I'll take my chances" Azami said before getting up and heading out their front door.

"Hmph. Well, it's a good thing then I packed her a big boxed lunch in case she changes her mind" Mako said as she took out two lunch boxes seemingly from nowhere. She handed them both over to Yuu, who had just managed to finish his breakfast.

"You make sure she gets hers, okay?" Mako asked Yuu earnestly.

"I promise mom" he replied, but before Yuu could make it to the door, he was stopped by Ryuko.

"And please don't tease her, Yuu. She has it hard enough as it is" Ryuko said in a very serious tone of voice.

"I'll... try not to, mama" said Yuu. And with that, he left their house, and their first day of the new school year had officially begun.

Shimura Junior High wasn't anything all that special; it was just another kid's school in Tokyo, but to Azami, it was much more than that. She had her parents change her and her brother's school district, so absolutely no one there would know who they were. Yuu always a bit of a loner without many friends, so the change did really upset him, and Azami was ecstatic for the possibilities this new school presented. She could learn from better teachers, meet new people, maybe even make some friends for once.

Azami put what she didn't need in her locker and went to her home room, parting ways with her brother Yuu. Even though the two of them were twins, Yuu was already a grade ahead of her because of his high test scores.

She entered the classroom with an air of enthusiasm that was rarely seen on her, but was even rarer on the other students by the way things looked. Almost half of them were all on their phones, laptops, or both, and didn't even look up when Azami entered the room. The

rest of them were even worse though; they all just had blank, expressionless stares, as if they were staring at something light-years away.

Azami walked up to one of the zombie-like people, a girl with long brown hair in the first row, and tried snapping to get her out of the trance. When the student didn't respond, Azami poked her right on her cheek.

"Ahh!" screamed the student.

"Ahh!" Azami yelled back, jumping backwards a bit in surprise. No one in the class seemed to notice this mutual freak-out, and if they did, they obviously didn't care.

"Yeah, what do you want?" asked the girl, clearly very annoyed.

"Uh, are you alright? Azami asked, very confused.

"Yeah, why wouldn't I be?" asked the student.

"Well, your face..." Azami paused for a moment to try and think of a way to put it as eloquently as she possibly could "... what the hell was wrong with your face?"

The girl became very angry for a moment before she realized what Azami was talking about. "Oh, you mean this?" she asked, pulling back her hair to reveal a white earpiece with a line down the center of it that was currently glowing red. "Everyone looks out of it when their VR devices are running".

"VR devices?" asked Azami.

"Yeah, they're the latest product by TONY. It lets you play Galactic Defense Force, or GDF, and it's a really fun game" said the schoolgirl.

"Hmm, I think I might check that out" Azami said curiously.

"I hope so, we could always use new clan members, after all" the girl said excitedly. "Look me up when you login, okay? My username is 'ChizukoRules121'".

"Okay, I'll..." Azami began to say, but she was quickly interrupted by the main classroom door slamming open. In stepped a tall, intimidating man with sunglasses, a buzz cut, and a large stack of papers in his hands. He clearly wasn't Japanese, but when he opened his mouth he spoke without an accent. Once he got to his desk he dropped the papers onto it and hit a large red button labeled 'Wi-Fi'. All the students who were in a trance suddenly snapped out of it and started paying attention.

"Alright students, listen up! My name is Mr. Smith, and if you try hard and work hard, then we are going to get along just fine" he yelled at his students. "But I do not have time or the patience to slow down for lazy students! I'm going to pass out the rubric for the class now, and if you have any questions, keep them to yourself".

Azami was starting to panic; she knew immediately that if she stayed in this man's class, she was going to fail. Her face lit up when she remembered her backup plan in case something like this happened; a gift to soften the teacher's stone heart.

"Uh, Mr. Smith? I have something for you" Azami said, taking a lemon out of her backpack and presenting it to her new teacher.

"... a lemon?" he asked in disbelief.

"They were out of apples at the grocery store, but a lemon's just as good, right?" Azami said, chuckling awkwardly in an attempt to break the tension.

"No it's not!" Mr. Smith yelled at her. "What am I supposed to do with a lemon? Just eat it raw? Who does that?"

Azami felt the urge to yell back, to not let herself get humiliated in front of her whole class, but she had had enough experience to know

that only makes things worse. She clenched the lemon in her fist so hard that juice started to seep out between her fingers, but she didn't say what she wanted to say.

"I'm sorry sir" she finally said before taking her seat near the center of the classroom. She tried her best to see the notes Mr. Smith was writing on the whiteboard through the tears in her eyes.

A few hours later and Azami was not feeling much better. One of the first subjects they went over that day was math, which she was not very good at. She didn't understand a thing her teacher was saying, and she dreaded the moment her homework was finally assigned. Writing class was just as bad, but she got some relief in history before she was finally allowed to break for lunch.

Once again, Azami found herself alone at a table in the lunch room, sulking in her own misery. She hadn't bothered to get in line for food; school food usually tasted even worse than her mom's.

"Speak of the devil" Azami said as she saw her brother approach with her boxed lunch in hand.

"You have to eat some time, you know" Yuu said, sitting down beside her.

"Yeah, but why does it have to be mom's shitty food?" asked Azami.

"I don't like her cooking any more than you do, but she put a lot work into making these. She doesn't show it, but it really upsets her when you make fun of her food". Yuu untied the napkin over his lunch, picked up his chopsticks, and grabbed his first croquette. "So show some appreciation and... dig in".

Even with his stoic face, it was clear Yuu was forcing himself to eat his lunch, and was simply forcing it down his throat instead of properly chewing it. Reluctantly, Azami started eating her lunch as

well. When they finally finished eating, Azami asked Yuu how his day was going.

"Very boring; I thought eight grade was supposed to be harder than sixth grade, but I suppose I was wrong for once in my life" said Yuu. "How about you? You're not in the principal's office yet, so your day must be going better than last year".

"Not really; my homeroom teacher's a total dick, and the others aren't much better" she said dejectedly. "But there is some good news. Some girl recommended that I play some virtual reality game called 'Galactic Defense Force' and join her clan!"

"Is this game like the last big VR game that came out a year or two ago?" asked Yuu, suspicious. "The one that killed you in real life if you died in the game?"

"I wish, I loved that game, but no, it's completely safe" Azami explained. "I looked it up, and apparently you don't even fight other players. You apparently work together fighting all these alien races, and the game's all about cooperation and shit like that. I'm going to ask mama to buy GDF for me when I get home, it sounds really fun. It's even got perfect tens on all the game review websites".

"You know how rigged those reviews are, right?" asked Yuu.

"Ah, you're just being cynical again" Azami said dismissively while waving her hand. "Besides, what's the worst that can happen if I buy the game?"

Galactic Defense Force

Chapter 2: Galactic Defense Force

"No" Ryuko said calmly at the dinner table before continuing to hear her miso soup.

"But why not?" whined Azami, her red eyes pleading as strongly as they could.

"The last time you played one of those VR things, you almost got your brain fried!" Ryuko said sternly, trying not to raise her voice too much. "You're lucky you got out of that alive".

"Don't be so paranoid" said Azami, brushing off her near-death experience like it was nothing. "They have standards and regulations for that crap now. It's one hundred percent safe, and it sounds really, really fun, so can I play it, huh, huh?"

"No; and my decision is final" said Ryuko.

"But mamaaa! All the cool girls have them, and if I don't get one soon, I'll be humiliated!" pleaded Azami.

"And if they all jumped off a cliff, would you?" asked Ryuko. "I swear, technophiles aren't any better than fashion victims; they're always getting the new big thing just because it's 'in' without even considering if it's good or not".

"Okay..." Azami said gloomily. Ryuko didn't have much time to wallow in her victory, however, as Azami still had a few tricks up her sleeves. "... I guess I'll have to go the rest of the school year without ANY friends. Such a shame... a girl even invited me to join her clan".

As if on cue, Mako stood up from her chair next to Ryuko and shouted "Hold it!"

hallelujah

"If Azami turns down this girl's invitation, then she'll come across as rude, and rumors will spread, and she'll become a social outcast! She'll grow up to be an old hermit/maid, with lots of smelly cats, and tons of gross stale candy. Ryuko-chan, you should get her this video game even if it does kill her, because a life without friends isn't a life worth living. And everyone knows that if you win with friendship..."

"... you win at life" said Ryuko dejectedly, finishing her wife's sentence. "Alright, I'll get you this Galactic Offenders, or whatever it's called".

"Yay!" said Azami.

"But not until I'm sure it's safe!" Ryuko said, cutting off Azami's celebrating. "I'll play it first, and if I'm not absolutely convinced that it can't hurt you, I'm throwing it in the toaster".

"Ah... thank you, mama" Azami said while bowing. As embarrassing as it would be to see her mom try to use technology, Azami knew that beggars couldn't be choosers in this situation.

Yuu just sat on his knees silently from the other side of the dining table, eating his croquettes diligently. It was hard to tell if he was thinking, or just trying to ignore the world around him.

Ryuko went out and bought two Galactic Defense Force earpieces from the local TONY store. When she got home that night, about an hour before Azami and Yuu would be getting back from school, and sat down on her couch with her wife.

"Okay Mako; if I'm not out in an hour, you call the police, understand? Don't try to come in after me" Ryuko deliberately explained.

"Don't worry Ryuko-chan, you're safe with me" Mako said brightly.
"And even if you're taken captive by Donkey Kong himself, I will stop at nothing to save you".

"That's reassuring" Ryuko said semi-sarcastically.

Hesitantly, Ryuko slipped the white earpiece into her right ear, and activated it, causing the light on the side to turn green.

When Ryuko regained consciousness, green was the only color she could see. Rows and columns of bright green lines formed a grid of green squares on the floor in front of her, and seemed to stretch on for miles. A few seconds later, a menu popped up in front of Ryuko.

"What is your name?" it asked.

"Ryuko Matoi" she typed into the virtual keyboard.

"Ryuko?" a voice suddenly said from nowhere. "Long time no see".

"What? Who's there? How do you know me?" Ryuko cried out.

"Relax, delinquent; I'm not here to hurt you" responded the familiar voice.

Something blue and polygonal started to form in front of Ryuko, and it didn't take her long to realize what, or rather who, it was.

"Houka Inumuta" said Ryuko. "I should have known a nerd like you would end up developing video games".

"You're one to talk, considering you're the one who bought this game" Houka retorted. "I'd have thought you got enough violence in real life; have you become so desperate for it that you actually turned to video games?"

Ryuko blushed at the accusation and stated defensively "As if. I'm just doing this to make sure the game's safe for my kids".

"Oh, you're referring to the 'incident' that occurred a year ago" said Houka. "You're right to be concerned, but I assure you that this game is completely safe. You can only play for twelve hours a day to avoid accidentally starving yourself to death, and the VR device itself is so safe not even Lady Satsuki would be able to kill you with it".

Inumuta then paused and adjusted his virtual glasses. This struck Ryuko as very odd, but thought nothing more of it. "Must be a force of habit" she thought.

"What's more is that instead of using direct neural inputs, Galactic Defense Force instead puts the user in a zen-like trance that allows them to interact with the game world" he explained carefully. "If they concentrate hard enough, anyone can quit the game with no repercussions. Try it now".

Ryuko closed her eyes and bit her tongue as she began to think. It took a few moments, but eventually Ryuko began to feel like she was waking up from a dream. When she opened her eyes again, Mako was staring at her with a worried look.

"Ryuko-chan... is that you? Are you there?" Mako asked, concerned.

"Yeah, it's me" Ryuko replied.

"Oh thank goodness!" Mako said, hugging her wife. "How's the game? Is it any fun?"

"Don't know; haven't played it yet" said Ryuko. "You're not going to believe who's running the game though; it's Inumuta!"

"Oh, well that's a good thing, right?" asked Mako. "We can trust him, can't we?"

"Well... we'll see" Ryuko said before reactivating her earpiece.

"Ah... so far, so good" complimented Ryuko. "Now then, what exactly do you do in this game?"

"I'm glad you asked" said Inumuta, who brought himself and Ryuko to a battle already in progress with just a wave of his hands.

All around them, custom built starships flew around a gigantic battle station, lasers firing in all directions. The humans, piloting the fighters, were trying to destroy the menacing alien battle station.

"As you can see, this game features real time combat against advanced A.I. enemies" Houka explained. He would have said more, but Ryuko quickly interrupted him.

"So it's just blowing shit up?" Ryuko asked curtly. "Not sure if I'd want my kids playing something like that".

"Oh, it's much more than that" explained Houka. "Money and experience aren't given just for killing an enemy, or 'blowing shit up' as you so elegantly put it. Instead, players are rewarded for working together and making friends. You can't even make your own star fighter until you've at least joined a clan, and anyone who causes too much trouble is swiftly banned".

"I'll admit, fighting aliens is cool and all" Ryuko said as she watched the light show in the distance, "but what's it all leading up to? What's the point of all the fighting?"

"Well, on a practical level, there isn't one" explained Inumuta like Ryuko was an idiot. "It is just a video game after all. But the money players receive in battle lets them upgrade their weapons, and experience lets them rise in rank in their guilds. It goes all the way from level one up to level ninety nine. The higher the level, the more powers and authority that player has".

"Hm, sounds familiar" Ryuko said mockingly.

"Indeed, but you must admit that living in Honnouji was very much like living in a video game" said Houka. "Besides, leveling up is what MMOs are all about. If we don't give players something to strive for, they wouldn't play for nearly as long".

"Well, what about subscription fees? Micro-payments? Any shit like that? I don't want you to nickel and dime us into bankruptcy" said Ryuko.

"Nothing like that, I assure you" explained Inumuta. "Just having the players share the game with all their friends is payment enough for us".

"Ah, that's your angle. Encourage people to make 'friends' so you can sell more copies of the game?" said Ryuko.

Houka laughed for a few moments before responding "Guilty as charged. You'd be surprised though; some really strong friendships have formed from this playing this game. I like to think that we helped at least a few people gain some real life friends".

"So, do you think I should let my kids play this game?" Ryuko asked as she mulled over her final decision.

"Doesn't matter to me" said Houka. "You've already bought headset, after all".

A second later Ryuko was logged out and had plenty of time to come to her final decision.

"Really mama? I can play?" Azami excitedly screamed. She had had an absolutely terrible day at school that day with assignments, teachers, and tests, and was incredibly grateful to hear some good news for once in her life.

"Yeah; I checked it out while you were at school, and it seems legit enough to me" explained Ryuko. "Go knock yourself out".

Azami could barely control herself as she was handed the white earpiece, and started jumping up and down with joy. "Thank you thank you thank you!" she said as she gave her birth mother a tight hug.

"Geez, it's just a stupid game" Ryuko said bashfully, rubbing the back of her head.

Both Azami and Yuu started walking to their separate rooms, but Yuu was suddenly stopped when Mako grabbed his arm.

"You should try it too; make some friends that are outside of your textbook for a change" Mako said sweetly.

"I appreciate the concern, but I assure you; I do not need any friends" Yuu said coldly.

Still, he kept the TONY device with him, and placed it in his desk in his room. Not even he really knew what he planned on doing with it, but he somehow felt that he would need the device very soon.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

As soon as she was in her room, Azami slammed her backpack into a corner of the room, shut her door, and placed her new VR device into her ear. Her backpack hit the wall so hard that pages of her schoolwork went flying everywhere, but Azami didn't bother cleaning them up. She had an adventure to start after all.

Once the game was activated, Azami experienced exactly what her mother did; a brief loss of consciousness, a green grid stretching on for miles, and then a menu asking for her name.

"Azami Matoi" she typed into the floating green screen. The next screen asked for her gender; male, female, or other.

"Female, duh" she said to herself as she selected the Venus symbol. Although, at this point, Azami didn't appear to have a body, so she could forgive it for not knowing straight away.

"Username?" was what the panel asked next, to which Azami just typed her name in again. She knew that was a bit risky on the internet, but she was confident that her moms would protect her from any stalkers if it came down to that. When some poor fool tried to mug them about year ago, mom Mako made sure his face left an imprint on the alley wall. She was a lot stronger than she looked.

With that final piece of information in place, Azami hit enter and felt a wave of sensations overtake her invisible body. Where there had once been numbness, there was now warmth and feeling, but there was one thing conspicuously missing.

"Where the hell are my clothes!" Azami shouted, covering herself up.

Not that hiding herself did much; her new virtual body, that appeared to belong to someone at least six years older than her, lacked any

visible genitalia or nipples. Her short black hair was gone too, instead replaced with medium length brown hair. It was like she was turned into a giant Barbie doll.

Looking around, Azami got a feel for her surroundings. She was standing on a blue, metallic disk that stood out like a sore thumb in the environment that she was in. She was in a dense, tropical jungle, with plants as far as the eye could see. Some were purple, some were red, and the rest were colored everything in between. It was like she had stepped inside a living rainbow.

“Welcome to the Garden of Eden” said a blue caption floating inexplicably in the air in front of her. Azami stepped down off the platform and into a river below her, which began rushing around her ankles.

The girl shivered at the sudden cold, and wriggled the sand between her toes. This wasn't the first time she played a VR game, but Azami could never really get used to how real everything felt. She walked over to a nearby tree and picked some yellow fruit that looked like grapes.

“Ahh, too sweet” she said, spitting it back out. Azami continued to follow the river until it eventually led a village. The houses seemed to be built into the trees themselves, and everyone in the town was dressed exactly like her, which is to say, not dressed at all. Men and women of all races were running around completely nude, although anything that would have raised the game's rating to above 13+ was conspicuously missing.

“Oh, so this must be the starting area” Azami mused to herself. “Are they all A.I., or are there some real players?”

Even though she wasn't 'really' naked, Azami was still too embarrassed to show herself in the town immediately, and instead chose to hide behind a nearby rock.

“Hey! Are any of you guys real?” she called out.

No one seemed to acknowledge her, and after a few moments another blue text box appeared saying "There are no other player characters in this part of the game". Another prompt then appeared saying "You can edit your physical appearance at any time. Press here to learn how".

She clicked the button with her finger, causing the world to freeze and turn green again. An editing screen then appeared, and Azami spent a few moments to change her hair and eyes to match her own. She decided to keep the adult body, however, since she enjoyed the sensation of being bigger and taller.

Knowing she was free from any real prying eyes, Azami stepped out into the open and started walking around town. She talked to some of the non-player characters, and most of them talked about how wonderful and peaceful living in Eden was. Azami asked if there were any stores nearby, or if there were any quests or jobs she could do, but they all just laughed and asked why anyone would need something as trivial as money.

Azami could already tell where this story was going, but decided to play along anyways for now. As Azami walked towards the other edge of town, she saw something that caused her to do a double take; a tree growing...

"Underwear?" she said out loud to herself. It looked like an apple tree at first, but all its fruit was underwear of all sizes and colors. Azami quickly picked out a matching pair of black panties and black bra and put them on, glad to at least have something on.

No sooner than she finished strapping her bra on, the ground began to shake. The villagers all started screaming and running in all directions as the sky turned red.

Some random woman ran up to Azami and grabbed her arm. "We need to get out of here!" she shouted as she dragged Azami back into town.

“What? What’s going on?” Azami asked, slightly confused.

The mysterious woman led Azami to a very advanced looking metal cylinder that she was surprised she didn’t notice before. “There’s no time, just get in” the woman said, throwing Azami inside the strange machine.

The door immediately slid shut behind her, and by the time Azami had turned around to look out the door’s window, she was already several meters off the ground. A few minutes later, Azami was high enough to see what was actually going on; a giant, evil looking space station was shooting the planet with a red laser, which was burrowing quickly beneath Eden’s surface. A few moments later, the planet exploded, sending giant chunks of rock hurtling in all directions.

It was very strange; Azami was genre savvy enough to know that the place was going to be destroyed, but she didn’t expect it to happen so brutally or quickly. She could even feel a few tears at the corners of her eyes, which she quickly wiped away.

“It was at that moment that humanity realized that it had been living in blissful ignorance of cruel world that surrounded it” said a disembodied male voice with a British accent. “Kill or be killed was the only rule in that applied in that dark galaxy, which the humans quickly had to adapt to without their protective home world. To protect themselves against the vast alien hordes, the remaining humans formed the Galactic Defense Force under their famous motto ‘War is Peace’.

But every day the GDF needs more and more soldiers to keep their ranks filled and humanity safe. So, do you have what it takes to join the GDF and become a true hero?” the voice finished dramatically.

“Wow, that was cheesy” Azami said as they continued to float through empty space.

“Hey, I didn’t write the stuff” the voice replied. “Don’t blame me”.

“Oh, hey, are you real?” Azami asked the disembodied voice.

“Well, I’m not human, if that’s what you’re asking” the voice replied. “I am, however, a real A.I. program; your tutorial program to be precise. My job is to make adjusting to the game as easy as possible”.

“What’s your name?” Azami asked.

“I don’t have one; you get to name me” he responded. “Just please don’t name me something stupid like ‘Hal’ or ‘Sparky’, okay?”

“How about just ‘Koe’ then?” she asked.

“Voice?” responded the A.I. “Short, sweet, and to the point. I like it! I already think we’re going to get along swimmingly”.

Azami’s escape pod then touched down onto meteor floating through space, and she stepped out onto it. She appeared to be in a very worn-down town, with rusted metal buildings, broken lights, and garbage littering the lifeless surface of the giant rock. The area also had a force field around it that helped keep oxygen inside the town, so Azami thankfully didn’t have to worry about breathing or explosive decompression.

“Welcome to ‘The Uncut Diamond’, the rat hole in the Remains of Eden that all the new players start out in before they officially join the GDF” Koe explained. “Think ‘Wild West Town’ but in spaaaaaace” he added sarcastically. “On your left is the item store, in front of you is the social area where you can meet up with other players, and on the right is the GDF recruitment center. Let me know if you need anything else”.

“Wait” Azami said immediately. “Why is everyone in their underwear?”

All around her, men and women were only walking around in their bare essentials, and no one seemed to mind. She could understand the A.I. villagers acting so casual, but this was highly unusual.

“Well, you can’t expect the game to just give you all the best equipment, now can you?” asked Koe. “You increase your stats by wearing different clothes, and the more clothes you wear, the more powerful you are, so naturally all the newbs given next to nothing at the start”.

“Well, what’s the level that I can start wearing pants?” Azami asked as she tried not to blush at all the people passing by.

“That would be level 30/99, but I may be using the word ‘pants’ a bit too generously in that situation” responded Koe.

“What?!? You’ve got to be kidding me! How am I supposed to fight in only my underwear?” she asked furiously.

“Well, if you go over to the GDF training center, I can show you” Koe calmly explained. “You really should try to stop being so embarrassed, however; if you don’t, you might accidentally log-“

Without warning, Azami suddenly found herself back her room. While she was grateful to be fully clothed again, she was disappointed that she got to see so little of the game. She still couldn’t join Chizuko’s clan, and she hadn’t even been able to shoot anything.

Right before she was about to log back in, Azami heard mom Mako call out from down stairs. “Dinner’s ready!” she yelled.

Azami looked at the digital clock on her wall and saw that an hour had already past. “Wow” she thought. “Was I really in there that long?”

She couldn’t dwell on that for long, however, and went downstairs to join the rest of her family.

Mako had thankfully made rice that evening, which Azami found at least partly tolerable. She forcefully shoved the food down her

thought as mama Ryuko talked about her day at work.

“... and so it turned out the marketing guys had already put together an advertising campaign before we even finished designing the product, and now we have to change our designs line up with their mistake!” Ryuko said exasperated. “I swear, I’m going to kick the marketing chair’s ass one of these days. It’s like appearances are all that matter to him”.

“Aww, that’s too bad” Mako said sadly in between bites of food. “How was your day Yuu? Are the upperclassmen treating you well?”

“For the most part, yeah” Yuu replied. “A few of them are calling me ‘shorty’, but they’re easy to ignore. I spend most of my time studying anyways” he responded.

“Have you joined any clubs yet?” Ryuko asked in a concerned voice.

“No; I’m still in the ‘Go Home Club’ for now, mama” said Yuu.

“What about you Azami? How was your day at school?” asked Mako.

“F-fine” Azami lied. “Well... mama, I’ve been seeing this... girl near school and...”

“Go on” Ryuko said, intrigued.

“And, she’s been wearing really revealing clothing, and I’ve been wondering... if that’s okay for a girl to do” Azami said meekly, trying her best to hide her true intentions.

Ryuko nodded knowingly before replying. “Well if that’s what she wants to wear, then there’s nothing wrong with it”.

“Really?” she asked. “That doesn’t make her a floozy or something?”

“Of course not; not that there’s anything wrong with being a ‘floozy’ either” Ryuko explained. “That IS what she wants to wear though, right?”

Azami thought back to the game and her opportunity to make some new friends and she nodded fervently. "Yes, it is" she told her mom.

"Well then, there's no problem then, now is there?" Ryuko asked.

"Oh my god, this is ridiculously stupid" Yuu suddenly interjected. "We know that you're both talking about you, Azami; why bother hiding it?"

Azami just sat there, mouth open and mortified by what her brother just said. Mako slapped Yuu over the head with a rolled up newspaper and said "Bad boy! A young girl's emotions are a delicate thing that should be handled as gently as possible. You're never going to get a girlfriend with that attitude".

"Pfft, like I'd ever want a girlfriend" Yuu said as he returned to his meal. Mako was about to say something else when Yuu abruptly added "Or a boyfriend, or anything like that".

Mako suddenly burst out into tears and started rolling around on the floor. "Whaaa, my only son isn't going to get married! That means I won't be able to design the wedding, or eat the cake, or anything!"

"There there dear" Ryuko said as she patted her wife on the back. "You'd better go to your room for the rest of the night, okay Yuu?"

"I'm... sorry mom" Yuu said, genuine sadness creeping onto his face. Nonetheless, he followed Ryuko's orders and left his dinner unfinished on his plate. Mako seemed to feel much better the next morning, but not even that could completely clear the guilt from Yuu's mind.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4: Chapter 4

After eating dinner the next day, Azami went back to her room and sat back down onto her bed. She took a few deep breaths and put her earpiece back in and turned it on. When she resynchronized with the game server, she was back where she was standing before, and still in her underwear.

“Oh, look who’s back” said Koe. “So do you think you can handle being in your knickers, or are we going to keep repeating this all night?”

“I-I’m fine” stuttered Azami. As soon as she said that the lag generated by her embarrassment caused several people around her to start teleporting around the place before settling down again.

“Yes... of course you are” he said, unconvinced. “Regardless, I suggest you sign up for the Galactic Defense Force and get a weapon; I can already tell you’re going to need a lot of training”.

“Wait, someone already invited me to her clan” said Azami. She wrote Chizuko’s username down on a piece of paper, but she realized too late that she couldn’t reach into her shirt pocket while playing the game.

“Shit!” she cried as she grasped her right breast. This caused quite a few players walking by to stop and stare at Azami, which caused her to light up like a beet and log out of the game.

Azami returned a few seconds later, but this time with Chizuko’s exact username. “ChizukoRules121 said I could join her clan. Do I have to complete training first or can I just do that now?”

“Oh my, now that changes things” said Koe. “If you’re invited by a friend, the person who invited you is rewarded thirty thousand credits

and you are automatically promoted to level 2”.

Azami’s body was suddenly engulfed in a cone of light, and she discovered that she had more clothing on than before when the cone disappeared.

“... A fucking wristband!” Azami swore, referring to the black wristband now around her left wrist. “That’s all I get for leveling up?”

“Not quite” responded Koe. “Wave your hand over it and see”.

Azami did as she was told, and almost instantaneously a gun appeared in her hand. It looked more like a toy than anything, with its boxy shape, bright silver color, and red rings around the barrel, but it was a gun none the less.

“Aw, sweet!” Azami said excitedly before pointing her new weapon towards the passing crowd. She started pulling the trigger, but nothing happened. “What? I finally get a weapon and I don’t even get to use it?”

“This isn’t Grand Theft Auto” said Koe, who was very annoyed. “You can’t just run around with a gun shooting at random people. That’s a five hundred credit fine right there, young lady”.

The number zero then appeared in Azami’s vision, which quickly changed to negative five hundred. “Go too far in debt, and you get banned from the game entirely”.

“What? But that’s not fair!” screamed Azami.

“Ooooh, that complaint against the rules just lost you another one hundred credits” Koe said mockingly. “You better start behaving or you’re going to have to take out a loan”.

Realizing she was digging her own grave, Azami reluctantly quieted down.

“That’s a good girl” said Koe. “Since you already joined a clan, which would be The Sharks by the way, I can send you directly to their headquarters for your first team mission. Would you like that?”

Azami nodded and found herself quickly teleported somewhere completely different. The interior of the place could best be described as a run-down bar, with fine green carpeting, a few pool tables, low hanging lights, and a few grease stains scattered around here and there. Towards Azami’s left was the same endless space she had seen while at the Uncut Diamond behind a window, and to her right was an enormous aquarium over twelve feet tall bustling with ocean life.

“Hey, you made it!” cried a familiar voice from behind Azami.

The brown haired girl from her homeroom class, Chizuko, appeared from behind and wrapped her arms around Azami’s neck in a hug.

“Thanks so much for joining The Sharks, I got a boatload of cash for it. I was even able to afford this!” Chizuko said, gesturing towards her outfit.

Even though she was already a level twenty, the girl still wasn’t wearing that much. She had on matching blue bra and panties, a blue wristband, blue high heels, two white garter belts, and an incredibly short skirt, to which she was gesturing with her hands.

“This armor increases my defense by a whole five points, and it makes me look pretty sexy too if I say so myself”. Chizuko emphasized this by shaking her rear end up and down towards Azami, causing the poor newbie to blush like mad and log out of the game.

Azami logged back on a few seconds later though, and was greeted by a new face. He was a boy in a grey thong, a silver shoulder pad, and silver bandolier of grenades strapped across his chest. His long bleach blond hair was tied back into a pony tail, and his teeth were

jagged and sharp like a shark's. On his shoulders he held a very expensive looking laser assault rifle.

"Don't worry about Chi, she's like that to all the new players" the strange man explained. He proceeded to shake Azami's hand with his cold, fishlike fingers. "The name's Kaito, and I'm the leader of this little clan. If you can't already tell, we just started, and we need as many members as we can get".

"Just started?" asked Azami.

"Yeah; even though Galactic Defense Force came out a month ago, there are already clans that have thousands of players, some of whom have even reached level fifty". Kaito gestured to himself and said "I consider myself pretty hardcore, but I'm still only level thirty".

"Hardcore my ass" came another voice, this time from behind a nearby pool table. The voice came from an exceedingly tall girl with bleached blonde hair tied into pigtails. She wore a silver bikini instead of lingerie, and a pair of silver flippers on her feet. She held a long wooden pool cue in her right hand, which she placed onto the pool table in front of her to line up her shot with the preset billiard balls.

"You got most of your XP from eating Doritos, and you know it" she playfully accused at Kaito before striking the cue ball and sending all the others ricocheting in random directions. Her wide smile shown the same sharp teeth that Kaito had.

"Yeah, well, no one asked you, Natsumi" Kaito responded, considerably annoyed. "I'm surprised to see you back, actually. What happened to GDF being 'for losers and virgins'?"

"Eh, the game's grown on me" she shrugged in response. "It's just like the ads say; once you start playing, you never want to stop".

Azami chose then to speak up; "Doesn't it seem a little odd that you're using something as advanced as virtual reality to play pool, of

all things?”

Natsumi just giggled and kept playing her game. “I like you already, newbie; you’ve got a sense of humor”.

“Uh, thanks” Azami replied, confused. “So... is this it?” Azami asked, gesturing towards her three new friends. “Is this everyone in the clan?”

“No, of course not” said Kaito. “We’re not a big clan, but we still have a couple dozen players in it, many of whom go to Shimura too”.

“Oh” Azami said uneasily. “You mean... we’ve met?”

“Well, I saw what Mr. Smith did to you on the first day, but we haven’t had the chance to chat yet” Kaito said. “Don’t worry, he’s like that to everyone; no need to be embarrassed”.

“Ah, that’s good” replied Azami, feeling a bit better for herself. “So if the clan isn’t here, where are they?”

“We’re currently conducting a raid against the Reptilians, a gold hoarding alien race, at mining colony a few light-years away” he explained. “I’d be leading them myself, of course, but, uh, it’s customary for clan leaders to greet-“

“He got shot in the first five minutes, like he usually does, and now we’re waiting for them to get back” interrupted Natsumi as she took another shot on the pool table.

“You know, if you’re going to undermine my authority so much, than maybe you should be the leader” Kaito said, glaring angrily at Natsumi.

“What, and fill out all those online forms? Forget it” she scoffed back at Kaito before turning back to Azami. “I’m here because I just got back from piano lessons”.

“And I’m here because I crashed my ship as soon as you joined the guild and gave me enough credits to buy this!” said Chizuko, gesturing back towards her miniskirt. “Fashion waits for nothing, not even war!”

“Hopefully I don’t need to tell you this, but please don’t commit suicide” Koe said in a sardonic tone inside Azami’s head. “It jeopardizes the mission, and you get fined five hundred credits”.

“Uh, I can think of at least five good reasons not to kill myself besides that” Azami responded. It took a few moments and a couple awkward stares before she realized that she had said all that out loud.

“Oh, uh, sorry. I was just talking to Koe, my tutorial program” Azami clarified.

“Oh, right” said Kaito, no longer confused. “I sometimes forget newbs can’t do that in their heads sometimes. Anyways, let me give you a quick tour of the place, since you’re here”.

First, he showed her the bar. “The drinks here are entirely for show; the game doesn’t have any simulated eating or drinking to help stop players from starving themselves to death. Don’t do that, by the way, it really makes the clan look bad”.

Azami thought back to her mom’s cooking and cringed. “No guarantees” she thought to herself.

“I heard that” Koe intoned angrily.

“However, the bottles are great for bar fights!” Kaito said, picking up a bottle of champagne and smashing it against the counter. “It’s all virtual here, so feel free to break things as much as you want”.

“Cool!” Azami said with a violent glint in her eyes.

“Over here are the pool tables, and back there is the pool” Kaito said, pointing towards both in the distance. “Both of them have pool sharks, and both kinds will eat you alive, though in different ways”.

Natsumi barred and licked her teeth at that last comment, sending a fearful shiver down Azami’s spine.

“Anything else I need to know?” asked Azami.

“Yeah; be sure to report any harassment, and, above all else, have fun! This is all just a game, after all” said Kaito. “Let me show you to the hanger; maybe we can get your fighter ready the next battle starts”.

“Yay!” chimed in Chizuko. “Please let me help you pick the paintjob! And the hood ornaments! And the thrusters, and the guns, and the...”

Back in the real world, Yuu had just finished all of his homework for the next month, and was now working on his next project; getting a girlfriend.

Or, at least, creating something that would be able to fool his mom into thinking he had a girlfriend. At the moment he had just thrown out the idea of creating an A.I. advanced enough to hold a conversation with Mako Matoi, as not even he was smart enough to make something like that. So instead, he was now trying to put together a voice disguising program so someone, most preferably him, could try and pretend to be his girlfriend over the phone.

“Testing, one, two, three” he said into his computer’s microphone. “Hm, maybe I should get a girl’s opinion on this voice. Hey, Azami!”

He walked to his sister’s room, but found that she was still playing her Galactic Defense Force game, and was met with only a blank expression on her face. He looked over to Azami’s backpack and saw that she didn’t even bother to take any of her homework out.

“Disgraceful” Yuu muttered, heading back to his own room.